

Eight of the ficus trees in the school's courtyard were looking unhealthy. They were wilted and could soon perish. A cure needed to be discovered at once. The school community was mystified. Therefore, the botany club was placed in charge of the dilemma. This frazzled group felt the extreme pressure. The club devised a contest to determine how to save the school's precious vegetation. The students' biggest concern was that perhaps no one would discover a way to revive the plants.

After hearing about the contest, Rob and Jon formed a two-man team. The following weekend, Jon drove to a neighboring town to get an unusual fertilizer for the beloved plants.

On Monday morning, tension was apparent in Rob's face as he paced back and forth in front of the school waiting for Jon's arrival. He watched with nervous anticipation. Soon he spied the bus as it slowed and stopped at the curb. When he saw his friend disembark, Rob hoped the solution had been found. As Jon exited, Rob noticed that he held a bottle of pellets in his hand. Jon waved and yelled, "Our plants are saved!"

The young future scientists won the contest. The club project was successful although further research to discover a permanent cure for the ailing plants would be necessary.

Athletes gather at the starting line of the Boston Marathon. The sun peeks over the horizon. Wind blows toward Peter and then drifts westward across the river into town. The scene crackles with excitement. As tension builds, racers squint their eyes and flex their muscles. No words are spoken as they move into position. There are hundreds of people participating every year, each individual with a different reason for being there.

Peter is a rookie sports reporter. When the editor assigned today's work, he told Peter to cover the competition from beginning to end. The rookie knows his first assignment may determine his future success as a writer. He breaks out in a cold sweat. His first story must be interesting and well written. Removing his fleece gloves, Peter's fingers sting with the morning chill. Nervously, he cracks his knuckles.

As Peter takes his pencil and writes a few preliminary notes, a gun signals the start of the twenty-six mile race. Should he focus on the leading racers? Who will reach the finish line first? Some, he knows, won't cross until late afternoon. Some won't complete the race. Will something sensational happen? Peter panics. He must decide on the main focus of his story. His editor wants the finished article on his desk before the 8:00 p.m. deadline.

Captain Gore, an android, had a new mission. He had been summoned from his home planet, Zan, located in the Star Galaxy. He was assigned to guard agents returning to Zan from Earth. The diplomats were carrying secret documents to their homeland. Word had reached them that cruel and hostile invaders were roaming the universe. The agents had requested Gore's protection. Soon a convoy retrieved the agents and headed back to Zan.

The fleet of starships whizzed around several galaxies. Then without warning, the main ship's computer broke down. The convoy was stranded between two stars. Hastily, the captain's engineer fixed the broken mainframe.

During the stop, Gore received a dire message. It was sent by high-frequency waves. The commander was alarmed. An armada of attacking raiders was headed their way. He quickly sought the advice of his most trusted crewman. When the assistant arrived, Gore explained the situation. He asked for suggestions. The assistant helped his captain consider all possible options.

Suddenly lights flashed. Sirens blared. The ship's gadgets had detected a huge comet. It was speeding directly at Gore's transport vehicle. Right away, he shouted "Mach 90!" He had to prevent his fleet from being demolished. Luckily, the spaceships narrowly avoided the impending collision. The attacking raiders were taken off guard. The rogues were destroyed.

Ancient cultures observed the stars and wondered about their origin. Ursa Major is visible in northern skies. This star pattern is one of the better known and easier to find constellations. It is often the first star formation people learn to recognize. Ursa Major is one of the largest celestial groups and contains the famous Big Dipper.

People once thought the Big Dipper looked like a wagon. Others thought it was a plow or a bull's thigh. They often named star groups after gods or other mythical creatures. Lacking scientific knowledge, elaborate stories were created. These tales helped explain why the shining images appeared in night skies.

Native American Indians created myths, too. They called the Big Dipper the Great Bear. The handle of the Dipper was the Great Bear's tail, and the Dipper's cup was the Bear's flank. Other Indians believed the "bowl" was a giant bear and the last stars of the handle were three warriors chasing it. Because the Big Dipper sits low in the autumn sky, it was thought that hunters had injured the bear. American Indians believed the blood from the bear's injury caused the trees to change color. This legend helped explain why leaves turned red in the fall.

The best time to observe the Big Dipper is on a moonless night when stars appear to be brightest.

Improved working conditions for the migrant farm worker is the legacy of Cesar Chavez. While growing up, his own family was forced to move from farm to farm. They followed seasonal, maturing crops. When he was only ten years old, he worked in the fields. He became aware of the awful working conditions Latino migrants endured. He watched husbands and wives labor side by side. Chavez saw the hardships his people faced each day.

Chavez attended over sixty-five different schools. Then he joined the navy. After serving his country, he returned to work as a farm laborer. He observed more hardships. Workers were given short-handled hoes for tending the fields. When people used this tool, they were forced to bend over all day. This caused severe back pain. Several families lived together in small, one-room dwellings. Sanitary facilities were poor. There were few medical services for either adults or children.

Cesar Chavez was enraged. He wanted his people to be treated with respect. He quit his job and began organizing the workers. After a few successes, he convinced grape pickers to strike. This resulted in a five-year boycott. The nation watched with interest. Although he was a pacifist, hostile conflicts with the growers occurred. Yet, under the leadership of Chavez, agreements were reached between laborers and farm owners.

In the 1850s, men from China traveled to this country in large numbers. They were seeking a better life. The men sought work anywhere. When they earned enough money, they planned to send for their families.

At this same time, people in the United States were moving west. They needed a safe and practical means of transportation across the country. Traveling from the East Coast to the West Coast was treacherous. Wagon trains were slow and awkward. Sailing around the tip of South America was hazardous. Businessmen knew building a railroad was the answer. Yet, the perilous task would be costly. It would also be labor intensive. They decided to build a cross-country, iron railway in spite of the problems.

Many laborers were needed. Chinese men were desperate for work. The immigrants were hired right away because their manual labor was cheap. Thousands accepted the tedious, dangerous job. The men had to level the land and lay heavy wooden ties and steel rails. They blasted tunnels with dynamite. They toiled in freezing mountains. They labored in burning-hot deserts. Workers faced many harsh conditions. They had to endure severe weather, shortages of food and water, and perilous terrain. Many died. Others persevered. The last spike connected the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads on May 10, 1869. Thanks to Chinese workers, people could now travel across the continent.

Many legends and myths grew around the heroic men and women who founded our country. Some of the more popular stories are about Betsy Ross and George Washington.

We know Betsy Ross was a seamstress. However, we cannot be certain the first flag of the thirteen colonies was designed and sewn by her. This story was originally told by one of her grandsons. Whether this tale was real or fictional, no one knows for sure. The story encouraged patriotism and love of country. Proud colonists rallied around the flag, as well as the legend.

Myths were told about George Washington. Supposedly, he cut down a cherry tree and later confessed to his father. Was the story true? To the contrary, a friend made up this folktale. The friend was trying to impress others about how honest Washington really was. Another legend is he threw a silver dollar across the Potomac River. Did he actually do it? The answer is no. This waterway is a mile wide, making such a feat impossible. Also, silver dollars didn't exist when Washington was alive. To this day, many people believe he wore false teeth made of wood. This sparks a smile because, while he did wear false teeth, the truth is stranger yet. Washington's dentures were made from human teeth, cow teeth, and carved elephant tusks. They were extremely uncomfortable.

These stories, though not factual, are colorful tales about America's fight for independence from England.

Colonists from various races fought for our country during the Revolutionary War. About five thousand were sons and grandsons of freed slaves. They were present during the first battles in April 1775. Soldiers of African descent fought in every major battle. These brave men played a vital part in winning freedom from England.

Some joined the Navy. Others served in the Army. They suffered beside fellow starving, freezing, and dying soldiers. Dozens fought in General Washington's regiment. The first African-American officer was Sam Middleton. He led a brave, black unit during the war.

James Forten was only fourteen years old when he joined the Navy. He was a powder boy on the *Royal Louis*. After little more than a month at sea, the British captured the ship's crew. James was held prisoner for seven months. He had a chance to escape by hiding in an officer's trunk. The officer was being exchanged for a British prisoner. James allowed a younger boy to take the space. James was finally released when he became part of a hostage exchange.

Today, military records reveal the names of many freed slaves who fought in this war. Indeed, they were a part of the "Spirit of 1776."



In the summer of 1896, gold fever spread like wildfire across North America. According to rumors, someone had found gold near the Klondike River in Canada. Hopeful men and women were stricken with gold fever. People combed western Canada and Alaska in search of the precious metal. Nome, Alaska, was first settled as a mining camp. It became an important hub of the gold rush. Fortune seekers relied on the growing city for supplies.

Prospectors grumbled but were willing to face the hardships. They chose to endure the harsh, frigid weather for a chance to become wealthy. Lives were lost in the freezing, arctic climate. Gritty miners searched the land for hidden riches. Burros plodded beside their masters with huge boxes of mining supplies. They were also laden with food items such as flour, beef jerky, and beans. Fresh vegetables were scarce.

There were many other hazards. Danger lurked everywhere. A ghastly fate awaited anyone who stumbled upon a grizzly bear. Bandits often robbed miners of their gold.

Some lucky miners struck gold in the mother lode. They filled their coffers with treasure. Most, however, returned home empty handed.

The Oregon Trail began in Saint Louis, Missouri. Pioneers were hoping to establish homesteads in the West. Settlers were advised to only pack basic food items. With drinking water, clothing, and cooking utensils, a covered wagon weighed more than three tons. Some people tried to take too much. So the trail was littered with abandoned belongings.

The westward migration began in early spring. Pioneers needed to make it across the mountains before winter. The people and livestock required water. They also needed relief from the sizzling sun. For these reasons, the trail followed various rivers. Oregon's Columbia River marked the final leg of the journey.

Pioneers were robust people. They had a great sense of adventure. Fathers drove the wagons. Mothers and young children rode in the wagons. Older sons and daughters herded animals alongside the caravan. The wooden wagon seats were hard and uncomfortable. To get relief, banged and bruised riders jumped off their wagons and walked.

Encounters with hostile Indians were not very common. Contrary to old, western movies, "circle the wagons" was not a cry to fend off Indians. It was an order by the wagon master. It meant it was time to form a corral for horses and oxen.

The journey wasn't always unbearable. Settlers took time to have fun. They told stories, sang, and danced around the campfire.

Local folktales referred to the dangerous shoreline. Apparently, no one had ever tried mapping the hidden, jagged boulders beneath the surface of the sea. Unaware of the danger, Captain Ahab was routinely steering his ship into port. Suddenly, a strong wind ripped the main sail. The ship uncontrollably veered toward the sharp rocks, piercing the boat and cutting a huge hole in the stern. It was moments from sinking.

Captain Ahab weighed his options. Knowing it was possible that his ship would be torn apart by the wind and waves hammering his vessel, he tried to save his crew. Roaring over his bullhorn, he ordered the crew to abandon ship. He assured his crew everyone would safely escape. Ahab would be the last man to leave his post. As captain, he was prepared to go down with his ship. When all hope of salvation was lost, a fishing trawler drew close and fired a lifeline to the men.

The thankful captain heard his men cheer each time another shipmate was pulled to safety. When he knew the last of his crew was aboard the rescue ship, he grabbed the lifeline and joined his men. Fortunately, due to the wise judgment of the captain, he and all crewmates were saved.

When most women were not even driving cars, Amelia Earhart was flying airplanes. In fact, she made a daring attempt to become the first woman to fly around the world. Toward the end of this dangerous journey, she mysteriously vanished.

The attempt to fly around the globe began when she flew east from Oakland, California. Earhart piloted her plane over twenty thousand miles. She nearly completed the flight. She was only a hundred miles from a tiny Pacific Island when the U.S. Coast Guard lost track of her. Her final message was at 8:30 PM on June 29, 1937. Since then, no trace of her has ever been found. What happened to her? There are many theories. Some suggested she was on a spy mission for the President. They think he asked her to fly over the Pacific Ocean to observe Japanese activities. Others say she was shot down and captured. Some insist she crashed in the ocean. No one may ever know what really happened to this famous pilot.

Earhart is best known for her fateful mission. Yet, she had many other flying achievements. She was the first to fly solo from Hawaii to California. She was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. She soon followed Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic. This made her the second person to solo across the Atlantic.